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Eugenics and the Human Genome Program

"If something is not worth doing at all, it is not worth doing well." This aphorism, which I learned almost half a century ago from a wise colleague, applies today to the Human Genome Project currently being activated. No one has been able to spell out the benefits to be expected from that project, either in terms of science, or of medicine, or of public health. The program has been promoted without public discussion by a small coterie of power-seeking enthusiasts.

The lack of clearly stated goals appears now to have befuddled the thinking of my friend, the usually level-headed editor of Science, Daniel Koshland (see editorial in the October 13 issue). The phantom promise of early diagnosis of a few hereditary diseases is being replaced in Koshland's editorial by hints of a eugenic program targeted to "the poor, the infirm, the underprivileged." Are they to be transformed (or perhaps altogether eliminated) by eugenic applications of genetic technology?

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Ten years ago, I battled against the unreasonable fears that genetic engineering might create unnatural forms of life. The real danger today is the possible emergence of an establishment program to invade the rights and privacy of individuals, whether in the area of sexual preference, or right to abortion, or drug addiction, under cover of beneficent eugenic intervention.

Will the Nazi program to eradicate Jewish or otherwise "inferior" genes by mass murder be transformed here into a gentler, kinder program to "perfect" human individuals by "correcting" their genomes in conformity, perhaps, to an ideal, "white, Judeo-Christian, economically successful" genotype?

Sincerely,

S.E. Luria
Institute Professor Emeritus